

Using Canes and Walkers

How do I know if I would benefit from using a cane or walker?

If you have pain or weakness on one side of your body that makes it hard to walk or balance, a cane may be helpful. If you have poor balance or feel unsteady on your feet, a walker may give you more support. Which type of cane or walker is best for you depends on several things, including your strength, fitness level, and balance. It is best not to choose the specific type of device yourself. Instead, you should make the choice with the help of your doctor.

How can I tell if my cane or walker is the right height?

The top of your cane or walker should be at the level of your wrist when you are standing with your arms relaxed at your sides. If it is higher or lower than this, you can ask your doctor to adjust it.

How do I use the cane or walker correctly?

Your cane should be held in the hand opposite to a weak or painful hip, knee, or leg. The cane should be moved at the same time as your affected leg. When you are going upstairs,

your good leg should go up first, followed by your affected leg and the cane. When going downstairs, do the opposite: your affected leg and the cane should go first, followed by your good leg. One way to remember this is the phrase, “Up with the good and down with the bad.”

When using a walker, both feet should stay between the walker’s back legs or wheels. With a cane or walker, try to stand upright without leaning forward or to the side. Take your time when turning and do not lift the walker off the ground while turning. Ask your doctor to watch you walk with your cane or walker to make sure you are using it correctly. A video about how to use a cane is available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRn8ZZJMzno>.

What if I still don’t feel steady on my feet?

Physical therapy may help if you need to work on your muscle strength, walking, and balance. A physical therapist can also help you use your cane or walker correctly. Your doctor can refer you for physical therapy at an office or sometimes in your home.

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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